

resulting from "a cold, artistic calculation" on the part of its highly entertained author. As a tiny matter of literal fact, no reader has more to go on than the young governess's word for this rather momentous and sidetracking allegation. As a rather large matter of literal fact, we may know, with but a modicum of attention paid to her recital of these nerve-shattering affairs at Bly, that it is she—always she herself—who sees the lurking shapes and heralds them to her little world. Not to the charming little Flora, but, behind Flora and facing the governess, the apparitional Miss Jessel first appeared. There are traps and lures in plenty, but just a little wariness will suffice to disprove, with a single survey of the ground, the traditional, we might almost call it lazy version of this tale. Not the children, but the little governess was hounded by the ghosts who, as James confides with such suave frankness in his Preface, merely "helped me to express my subject all directly and intensely." * * *

So, on *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James has won, hands down, all round; has won most of all when the reader, persistently baffled, but persistently wondering, comes face to face at last with the little governess, and realizes, with a conscious thrill greater than that of merely automatic nerve shudders before "horror," that the guarding ghosts and children—what they are and what they do—are only exquisite dramatizations of her little personal mystery, figures for the ebb and flow of troubled thought within her mind, acting out her story. If the reader has won for himself a blest sense of an extension of experience and consciousness in the recognition that her case, so delicate, so complicated, so critical and yet so transparent, has never in its whole treatment been cheapened or betrayed; if he has had, in the high modern sense, all of his "fun," he has none the less paid; he has worked for it all, and by that fruitful labor has verified James's earliest contention that there was a discoverable way to establish a relation of work shared between the writer and the reader sufficiently curious to follow through.

EDMUND WILSON

The Ambiguity of Henry James†

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Observe that there is never any evidence that anybody but the governess sees the ghosts. She believes that the children see them but there

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is never any proof that they do. The housekeeper insists that she does not see them; it is apparently the governess who frightens her. The children, too, become hysterical; but this is evidently the governess's doing, too. Observe, also, from the Freudian point of view, the significance of the governess's interest in the little girl's pieces of wood and of the fact that the male apparition first appears on a tower and the female apparition on a lake. There seems to be only a single circumstance which does not fit into the hypothesis that the ghosts are hallucinations of the governess: the fact that the governess's description of the first ghost at a time when she has never heard of the valet should be identifiable by the housekeeper. But when we look back, we see that even this has been left open to a double interpretation. The governess has never heard of the valet, but it has been suggested to her in a conversation with the housekeeper that there has been some other male somewhere about who "liked every one young and pretty", and the idea of this other person has been ambiguously confused with the master and with the master's interest in her, the present governess. The master has never been described; we have merely been told that he was "handsome." Of the ghost, who is described in detail, we are told that he has "straight, good features," and he is wearing the master's clothes.

The governess continues to see the spirits, and the atmosphere becomes more and more hysterical. She believes that the children get up at night to meet them, though they are able to give plausible explanations of their behavior. The children become obviously uncomfortable; they begin to resent the governess. The boy begs to be sent to another school and threatens to write to his uncle, and the girl, under the governess's pressure to make her admit that Miss Jessel is haunting her, breaks down and demands to be sent away.

The governess is now left alone with the boy. A gruesome scene ensues. "We continued silent while the maid was with us—as silent, it whimsically occurred to me, as some young couple who, on their wedding-journey, at the inn, feel shy in the presence of the waiter." When the maid has gone, and she presses him to tell her why he was expelled from school, the boy seems suddenly afraid of her. He finally confesses that he "said things"—to "a few", to "those he liked". It all sounds very harmless: there comes to her out of her "very pity the appalling alarm of his being perhaps innocent. It was for the instant confounding and bottomless, for if he *were* innocent, what then on earth was I?" The valet appears at the window—it is "the white face of damnation". (But is the governess condemning the spirits to damnation or is she becoming damned herself?) She is aware that the boy does not see it. "No more, no more, no more!" she shrieks to the apparition. "Is she *here*?" asks the boy in panic (he has heard from his sister the

incident of the governess's trying to make her admit she has seen Miss Jessel). No, she says, it is not the woman; "But it's at the window—straight before us. It's *there!*" . . . "It's *he?*" then. Whom does he mean by "he"? "Peter Quint—you devil!" His face gave again, round the room, its convulsed supplication. "Where?" "What does he matter now, my own?" she cries. "What will he *ever* matter? I have you, but he has lost you forever!" Then she shows him that the figure has vanished: "There, *there!*" she says, pointing toward the window. He looks and gives a cry; she feels that he is dead in her arms. From her point of view, the disappearance of the spirit has proved too terrible a shock for him and "his little heart, dispossessed, has stopped"; but if we study the dialogue from the other point of view, we see that he must have taken her "There, *there!*" as an answer to his own "Where?" She has finally made him believe either that he has actually seen something or that he is on the point of seeing something. He gives "the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss". She has literally frightened him to death.

When one has once been given this clue to *The Turn of the Screw*, one wonders how one could ever have missed it. There is a very good reason, however, in the fact that nowhere does James unequivocally give the thing away: everything from beginning to end can be taken equally well in either of two senses. * * * The whole thing has been primarily and completely a characterization of the governess: her visions and the way she behaves about them become as soon as we look at them from the obverse side, a solid and unmistakable picture of the poor country parson's daughter, with her English middle-class class-consciousness, her inability to admit to herself her sexual impulses and the relentless English "authority" which enables her to put over on inferiors even purposes which are totally mistaken and not at all to the other people's best interests.

The Turn of the Screw, then, on this theory, would be a masterpiece—not as a ghost story, there are a great many better ones of the ordinary kind—but as a study in morbid psychology. It is to this psychological value of the ghosts, I believe, that the story owes its fascination: it belongs with *Moby Dick* and the *Alice* books to a small group of fairy tales whose symbols exert a peculiar power by reason of the fact that they have behind them, whether or not the authors are aware of it, a profound grasp of subconscious processes.

And when we examine the story in this light, we understand for the first time its significance in connection with Henry James's other fiction—for the first time, because on any other hypothesis *The Turn of the Screw* would be, so far as I remember, the only story James ever wrote which did not have some more or less serious point. We see now that it is simply a variation on one of James's familiar themes: the

frustrated Anglo-Saxon spinster; and we remember that he presents other cases of women who deceive themselves and others about the sources and character of their emotions.¹ * * *

* * * Even after we have made out the case for the hallucinated governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, the ambiguity still remains. Did James really ever intend us to find the clue? See his curious replies in his letters to people who write him about *The Turn of the Screw*: to what seem to have been leading questions, he seems to have given evasive answers, dismissing the story as a mere "pot-boiler", a mere "jeu d'esprit". Is the governess nice or is she horrid? Olive Chancellor in *The Bostonians*, though tragic perhaps, is horrid, and she is vanquished by Basil Ransom. There is, however, always the possibility in the case of *The Turn of the Screw* that James may be deliberately amusing himself at the expense of the mystification of his readers. * * *²

KATHERINE ANNE PORTER, ALLEN TATE,
MARK VAN DOREN

A Radio Symposium†

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PORTER: When I first read this story, I accepted the governess's visions as real, that is, the ghosts were real in themselves, and not only the governess, perhaps, but others might have seen them; they had a life of their own. But as I went on reading the story and studying it through the years, and I read Henry James's notes on it, I decided that the ghosts were a projection of the governess's imagination and were part of her plot.

TATE: It is evident, Miss Porter, isn't it, that nobody actually sees these people but the governess?

PORTER: Nobody.

TATE: James is very adroit in convincing the readers that perhaps they can be seen by other people, or have been, but if you look closely it is perfectly evident that nobody sees them as physical existences but the governess. I don't say that that destroys their reality.

PORTER: Not at all.

¹ Wilson refers to Olive Chancellor, from James's *The Bostonians*, as the strong-willed spinster who is blind to her own sexual motives [Editors].

² Wilson's essay was substantially revised and reissued in 1948. In this second version, Wilson attenuates his original reading of the governess's neurosis. In 1959, Wilson added a note in which he once again endorsed his original 1934 position [Editors].

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